

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

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“Empty”

The second in a series entitled, On Being Christian

John 2: 1-11

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It's always important to remember and for us to say from time to time that sacred scripture is multi-layered. It speaks to and from many levels. It's not just a recording some journalist gave us of what happened.

“He said, she said...”

“Then this happened and then that happened.”

Just the facts, man. Man, just the facts.

There's more to it. It's complex and beautiful, written by folks who understood what they were up to. Pulled together by a community pondering it and being impacted by it for years and years. Not to mention, that we believe as people of faith, that it is inspired by the Holy Spirit, breathed by God. It is another manifestation of the Word eternal...

The Word became created...The Word became flesh...And it also became Holy Writ.

And don't think you'll have ever mined all its treasure. It's fun to try, though... But what you find is that the more you dig, the deeper it gets.

John's gospel is that way... Amazing stories that seem clear enough at first reading...easy to get. Then in time,... wonderful visionary narratives that are so mysterious. It's that way on every page.

In John two, there's a wedding. Jesus goes to a wedding. And just reading that story at a very literal level and seeing that Jesus goes to a wedding is very important. Lots of you, I'll bet most of you, saw it all wrong. As Carlos Colon mentioned at lectionary breakfast, most of us pictured him like Ghandi walking about real serious like... thinking, saying holy things...

“Yea... verily... a feast of marriage doth remind me of the Kingdom of God.”

“Yea...double verily...those olives are liketh unto one who loves God.”

Wrong!!!!!! He was doing the Chicken Dance. He wasn't over in the corner quoting from Isaiah to all the tea-toddlers at the party. He was in the thick of it. He was doing the Hokey Pokey.

“You put your left sandal in, you put your left sandal out, you put your left sandal in and you shake it all about. You do the Hokey Pokey and you turn yourself around. That's what it's all about.”

Did you know... that if you can't see Jesus doing the Hokey Pokey, you're on your way to being a heretic. Seriously... not wanting Jesus to be human gave rise to half the heresies in the early church.

And by the way, what we think of Jesus shapes what we think of ourselves... and what it means to be human... and whether or not we belong at the party doing the Hokey Pokey. And whether or not we can be real.

Jesus is divine...Jesus is human, and John will never let us think otherwise about him. The gospel... ends with Jesus sitting on the beach, eating fish tacos for breakfast... And it begins with Jesus out on the dance floor (and remember if you're flinching... you're a heretic).

Jesus is about to start the “Cotton Eyed Joe” when Mary comes up to him all white faced... she's aghast... **“Dear, a word with you please.”**

And she pulls him over to the side to say, **“They're out of wine.”**

And it's impossible for us to get the significance of this. In a culture where hospitality is a sacred duty and parties like this were rare. Most folks led simple lives... bread and cheap wine...

cheap fish... an olive here or there. A few nuts on the table if the week had been good. But when someone in the community got married... everyone... everyone got to party.

Everyone got to feast... So the whole town looked forward to the year-long engagement coming to an end and the wedding banquet beginning. They'd been eating baloney sandwiches for a year... day after day, but then the invitation came.

*We humbly request the honor of your presence
To witness our children's wedding vows
and feast with them afterwards at the Cannan Club.*

You put that one on the fridge. Maybe make a new outfit... or buy one of those fancy Persian ones from the Galilean Gap... or maybe even from Herods.

All the guys would get a shave and a hair cut... Heck, they'd probably even take a bath.

Well, the day would come and the party would begin and the wine would flow... but for some reason not at this wedding. Maybe someone didn't communicate well with the caterer. Too many uninvited guests from the outlying villages around Cana. Who knows? Frat boys out back tapping the keg...maybe.

Mary, Jesus' mother, was obviously acting as a wedding coordinator... maybe an aunt to the groom... Some of the noncanonical gospels say she was a relative or good friend of the bride or something like that. Maybe she messed up on the wine order.

She's horrified because no wine means the end of the party. It's just the ultimate social blunder. It's the worst wedding faux pas.

Worse than the groom saying his old girl friend's name during the vows. **"I Ross, take you Rachel..."** It's way more embarrassing and shaming than that.

It'd be like on Abby's wedding day, the caterer coming to me and saying, **"You're going to have to make an announcement before we get started."** And I have to stand up and say after the recessional.

"We know you all were invited to the reception, but as it turns out I can only afford to feed fifty of you so only the first five rows can eat at the reception. The rest of you can come, but don't eat anything."

Worse than that... Wine was a big deal... and not just because it helped folks get beyond their inhibitions and dance the Hokey Pokey. It was symbolic. The Rabbis said, **"Without wine, there is no joy."** It wasn't about getting drunk, which was a disgrace... it was about a celebration... and Mary is petrified that this one is about to come to a screeching halt.

So she pulls Jesus out of the Cotton Eyed Joe line and says in a panic... **"We're out of wine." "It's all gone." "Empty."**

And here's where it's important to move beyond what is only historical. Because... sure... Jesus is about to save a party and isn't that nice... but he's also about to save the world... and he's about to save you. That's what the story is finally about.

And Mary makes the announcement not just for this young couple at Cana... but for all the world. **"We're empty... we've run out of joy."**

Remember, on the Sunday after Epiphany, we're wondering together about what it means to be Christian. How it happens... what it involves. What it means about us.

And I think, at the most fundamental level, a Christian is one who at one point... if not every day, goes to Jesus and says, **"I'm empty... without you, I'm in trouble... the party's over."**

Being a Christian does involve confessing some things about God and about God in Christ and we'll be talking about that later. But it also... maybe first... involves confessing something about yourself. **"There's a hole in my bucket"** is the way I first learned to say it.

We are made a certain way... the Divine image is within us, it's there... but it's been obscured. We're clouded.

We're created to live with a certain connection to our Creator... but the connection's been broken. We're fragmented.

Our essence is in God himself. God is our center and our only true home... but we've gone astray... we're lost. And if we're lucky at some point we come to know that. It's bad enough being lost... but not knowing it is the real disaster.

It's sad enough to be in a relationship that's dying but even worse not to know it.

... To have a hole in your bucket and have water spilling out behind you, and you don't really get why you're having to make so many trips to the well.

To be a Christian is to say, **"I'm empty... and I must turn to the only one who can fill me."**

Gregory of Nyssa wrote, **"I bear in my heart the desire for the immortal."** A Christian is one who has not only felt the ache inside... but has some sense of what the ache means.

The ache is there as a gift and a thousand saints have said it poetically a thousand ways. Another I read this week said, **"Every person is a gaping space waiting to be filled by God."** We need to know both things, don't we ... I'm empty and there's only once source of satisfaction.

Life... typical, fallen, day in day out life, is the story of us all *Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places* as the Eagles sang it. And worse, really... not only looking and searching in all the wrong places... but trying all the wrong things... and doing it all unconsciously. We don't even know we're doing it.

A Christian is one who finally says, **"I'm empty... the party's over..."** and then turns to Jesus to say, **"Can you help... please?"**

Seems simple in a way... And it is, in a way. "Do something, God." But it doesn't seem to happen so simply. Not for lots of us.

Recognizing within us this yearning for more and naming it... isn't so easy. It doesn't seem to happen... not really happen down deep, until we've somehow gotten to the bottom of the barrel.

Olivier Clement writes, **"For a moment we must lose our balance, must see in a flash of clarity the meaninglessness of suffering, the ripping apart of our protective covering of happiness or moral virtue."**

Can we just... sort of... hang out here for a moment?????

With how hard it is to get to our hunger???

To know our emptiness??

To see our own nothingness apart from God?

It's clear in the Gospels that this seeing doesn't come easily. And oddly enough, those who seem to have it going on have the most difficult time seeing.

Almost like their goodness gets in the way. Like the religion they have, which is God's gift to them, is somehow the problem now and they can no longer see their own need.

...So many stories in the gospels, so many teachings, where Jesus is saying things like, **"The harlots are going to get this first... Those wretched tax collectors are way ahead of you. The party animals for whom the Hokey Pokey has been way too important...they will enter the kingdom first."**

Remember the way it goes in the gospels. The people like us... insiders... get invitations to the big banquet and don't show. The physician comes to town and sets up a practice, and we have not diagnosed ourselves among the sick, so we don't need a doctor.

It seems so backwards, I know. But Jesus seems to say over and over... **"Just a little bit of religion can kill you."** **"External stuff... shallow spirituality...a little or a lot of morality... somehow ruins our appetites for the main course."**

It's like we're all out in the foyer at the wedding...we good folks with all the right behavior and all the correct beliefs... and the real meal is inside but we're just doing appetizers in the foyer.

Cucumber sandwiches...

A sip of champagne with a stuffed shrimp or two.

It was supposed to make us hungry for more.

Instead we've gorged ourselves on it... on the wrong things. And it may not be some obvious idol...materialism, or climbing the ladder of success or hedonism... or finding the perfect relationship... or the perfect job. We've got religion. But... it may be... that we're still empty. They were.

There's a reason Jesus has them fill the six empty water pots that are there for purification. That's the religious stuff... the water they washed with before meals and worship... a way to be clean on the outside, which would hopefully lead to a deeper cleansing. But it didn't... not always.

Any created thing... even religion or the church or doctrine or morality...can be an idol... and it cannot take away the emptiness. "The law can't do it," Paul says.

"I am the way," Jesus says... not your beliefs about me... not your morals in my name. **"I am... me... the being of God..."** is the idea the word gets at. Only what is "uncreated" can be for you what you need. Only what is infinite will satisfy. Being.

We often have just enough of Jesus to keep us moderately satisfied... and we develop what one poet calls, **"Mouse souls."** And we nibble here and nibble there... nibble a little at worship. Do something nice for the poor. Nibble, nibble. Say a prayer over the steaks. Nibble, nibble, nibble. We need to get hungrier...

Hungry like those whose lives have crashed in around them... where there's no need to pretend any more... where you can't pretend any more. You know you're helpless. And all there is to do is cry, "Help me."

With Mary, to turn trembling and to say, **"Help... we're empty."**

We must begin, as one spiritual writer put it, **in discovery of our own finiteness. We must begin in our longing for the infinite, knowing that we are not self-sufficient... that the source of our joy is not we ourselves.** (Clement paraphrased... p 19, "On Being Human")

So... Mary, as always, leads the way. She is the first Christian really. The one in whom the human and divine dwelt. She experiences all the mysteries first. She is also the one who says, not only to the servants, but to the whole world, **"Do whatever he tells you to do."**

There are those mysterious levels again. At one level, this is a mom saying, **"Son... take care of this... I've been watching you and this couple's in trouble and you can fix it."**

At another level... this is Mary, the Theotokos... the bearer of God, answering a question... What's her role? Jesus articulates it, **"What have you to do with me?"** And Mary answers it. **"I point to the son. Do whatever he tells you to do."**

And in the weeks to come, we'll try to talk about that and how that leads to being Christian. Apparently, if Jesus is to be our savior he must also become our teacher. For now, here in the beginning of our journey... it is enough to say, today and every day, **"I'm empty... Jesus... will you please do something about that? Please, please save me."**